

## The Power of Unity

It was a beautiful day, in many ways reminiscent of another perfect day, an early September morning in 2001. An impromptu speaker's platform was set up in front of a line of flags, standing stiffly upright in the brisk wind, a familiar feature of this sacred valley. A singular group of people had gathered on this sunny day. It was a crowd whose members numbered among the famous and the mostly incognito. But every person there, despite their evident diversity, shared a common link.

Saturday, November 7, 2009, was a day when a dream ended, and reality began. Construction of the Flight 93 Memorial is officially underway.

For most of the past 8 years, a highly dedicated coalition of people have worked tirelessly, sweating blood as they surmounted innumerable hurdles. Working together, they survived unending frustration and celebrating each hard-won victory. It is an interesting collection of people. A task force and a commission made up of those with political power and personal influence, those with the "juice" to make things happen. It also included stalwart members of the National Park Service, a few helpful volunteers, and a corps of dedicated Ambassadors, proudly wearing those sky-blue shirts. And at the heart of it all, a collection of families, all linked by a terrible personal tragedy experienced on the canvas of a larger Day of Infamy. Together these remarkable people shared a dream; a dream to build a lasting memorial to 40 ordinary people who, in the face of terror and violence, stood together and fought back. On a dark day, they provided a ray of light; a light of unity, of courage, and of sacrifice.

19 ceremonial shovels, their polished steel catching the bright sunlight, each turned a representative mound of earth. As Patrick White said, it was not a ground breaking, it was a ground *raising*; for the ground there has already been broken.

Over the next two years, this now-vacant field will be covered in heavy machinery and scores of workers, the din of construction filling the air and dispelling, for a time anyway, the evocative silence of this place. Barring any unforeseen disasters, on September 11, 2011, the tenth anniversary of that terrible day, this same group of dedicated people, joined by a few more, will gather again to dedicate a new memorial, one that will stand in silent testament to heroism and unity for generations.

The story of this memorial is a lot like the story of those who will be honored by it. Groups of people, previously unknown to each other, who were thrown together to accomplish a great task. And they weren't alone. From across the country, even across the globe, people responded with donations. Each gift was small, but collectively amounted to millions of dollars. In September, Ken Nacke, one of the Flight 93 family members, organized a ceremonial motorcycle pilgrimage, "Ride With the 40," which traced the original path of the plane from Newark International to San Francisco International Airport. Everywhere this small caravan stopped on their cross-country journey, people flocked to the location. They came to talk about their memories of that day and what the sacrifice of the passengers and crew meant to them. They came to reverently touch the portable memorial, making a personal connection between the heroes and their hearts. With full hearts and tear-filled eyes, the riders arrived in San Francisco, carrying with them \$120,000 in donations and pledges raised for the memorial along the 3,250 mile journey.

What is truly remarkable about this story is the incredible level of dedication and commitment demonstrated by everyone involved, from the smallest donor to the most powerful.

And their absolute refusal to give up.

Make no mistake, this was a long and rocky journey, paved and papered by difficulties and adversity and miles of letters, forms, permits, and proposals. But all that pain was put aside on Saturday. As Gordon Felt, the President of the Families of Flight 93 rejoiced, "We made it!"

The lesson that we should all take from this is that any group of people united by a meaningful cause and dedicated to a common outcome can achieve great things. This is a valuable piece of wisdom, given the difficulties we all face today. The aims of the terrorists were thwarted because a group of strangers aboard United Airlines Flight 93 stood as one. Their memorial will now become reality because another group of strangers in a small Pennsylvania village stood as one. They linked arms with Americans across the nation and all stood as one. Unity, the simple act of people working *with* each other instead of *against* each other proved to be a powerful force for good, showing that great things can happen; perhaps even miracles.

It is a lesson we as a nation should take to heart.

Ralph F. Couey  
Friends of Flight 93